



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

1500 Jefferson Street, SE • P.O. Box 40975 • Olympia WA 98504-0975

December 13, 2022

Dear Early Learning Advisory Council,

Thank you for your recommendations on the Workforce Retention Grant and MERIT. We are grateful for the tireless work of child care providers and the guidance of ELAC – before, during, and in this transition time out of the pandemic. The retention grant was meant to honor our state’s child care workforce. We know that no grant process is perfect and that some providers felt left out by our process.

During the past year DCYF heard from providers that they wanted some additional support with staffing issues. Because of this feedback, DCYF decided to use unspent federal funds that the agency was given for administering the federal Stabilization Grants to create an additional grant round for providers. This underspend amounted to \$13M, after the Stabilization Grant timeline was extended. DCYF allocated all of this to the Workforce Retention Grant. These dollars were intended to be an add-on for providers who had already received the Stabilization Grants.

During the pandemic, DCYF distributed hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to the child care field. We are required to provide accountability measures to ensure proper use of public funds, and are under greater scrutiny to do so given the large amounts of money we have given out. In order to get the Workforce Retention Grants out the door we needed a way to verify information on applications, and we chose an option that would create the least barrier because it used existing rule and practice.

In order to support providers in the grant application process, technical assistance was available for this grant through the Imagine Institute and Voices of Tomorrow. This included assistance in understanding the eligibility requirements and how to update employment records in MERIT, group sessions in multiple languages, and one-on-one assistance.

An eligibility requirement of this grant was that providers have their staff records in MERIT up-to-date. Per the WAC, this means that all current employees are confirmed by the provider and all employees who have left have been end-dated. The requirement for staff records to be confirmed was not new, nor was it specific to the Workforce Retention Grant. This aligns with the child care licensing WAC for staff records: [WAC 110-300-0115](#), which states that:

- (1) An early learning provider must establish a records system for themselves, household members, staff, and volunteers that complies with the requirements of this chapter. Early learning program staff records must be:
 - (a) Verified by the licensee, center director, assistant director, or program supervisor;
 - (b) Entered and maintained in the electronic workforce registry, if applicable. Paper records may be discarded once entered into the electronic workforce registry and confirmed by the department;
 - (c) Updated to delete staff names from the electronic workforce registry when no longer employed at the early learning program;

This WAC is listed in the Initial Checklists for Child Care Center Applicants and for Family Home Child Care Applicants. It is explained in the [Child Care and Early Learning Licensing Guidebook](#) on page 91. Additionally, providers are prompted on a quarterly basis when they log in to MERIT to attest to their facility site staff records. Specific information about confirming employment records is available in the [MERIT Facility/Site Registration Guide](#).

DCYF used MERIT data from the day the application closed to determine which workers were in eligible roles to receive a retention payment. Unfortunately, workers who are in self-entered status cannot be considered by DCYF as eligible employees – allowing for this would open up the grant to fraud and misuse. DCYF cannot extend the workforce retention grant application as the deadline has passed, dollars are out the door, and we are outside of the timeframe the federal authorities gave us to spend the money. At this time, we don't have access to additional funding to add on to this grant or a mechanism for making a request for additional funds.

We recognize that there is still a lot of strain on the child care system. We are hopeful that additional resources may be dedicated during the next legislative session to provide lasting and systemic support to this critical field. As you know, DYCF has requested more than \$1 billion in child care and early learning funding for this upcoming biennium. To review these requests, please visit [our website](#). We also recognize that the Legislature expects DCYF to be good stewards of public money. With this grant process we believe we struck a balance between that and making a simple process by which providers could gain more resources.

Thank you again for reaching out and sharing your concern. Your feedback helps make our processes better going forward.

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